



State of North Carolina
Department of Health and Human Services

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Federal Review of Child Welfare Praises State, Cites Need for Improvement

RALEIGH – The U.S. Administration of Children and Families delivered its review last week of North Carolina's children's services programs, including child protection, foster care, and adoption services.

The federal review identified many strengths in the policies and procedures that make up the child welfare system in this state, but identified the need for greater consistency in services provided to children and families. North Carolina is the second state (after Delaware) to undergo this new federal review.

The review, which looked at cases from 1998-99, cited inconsistencies in how cases are handled, and a lack of community resources, especially for mental health and child abuse prevention.

"We're taking this review very seriously, because children's lives are at stake," said Carmen Hooker Buell, secretary, NC Department of Health and Human Services. "When the report talks about inconsistencies, that relates directly to the education and high turnover of our county staff. We've made strides recently with our new program to educate and build a more stable workforce. For example, the Child Welfare Education Collaborative will be graduating 38 social workers this month who will go to work in our county offices, already fully trained. That's a good start.

"Since 1999, we've expanded the Intensive Family Preservation programs that work to prevent abuse in at-risk families. We've also continued our Families for Kids program and our Family Resource Centers, which have improved child welfare in every county they've come to. It's always better to prevent abuse than to respond to a child who's already been hurt. All of these efforts speak directly to the concerns raised in the review, and all may be threatened in the current budget crunch. We need to continue these efforts, and do more."

Specific improvements needed include:

- Reports of repeat maltreatment are not always given the same level of intervention as initial reports;
- Need for more services for adolescents in foster care with behavioral issues;
- A shortage of therapeutic homes and institutions for foster children with mental health needs;
- Need to do a better job with "in-home" cases (where child abuse or neglect has occurred but the children did not have to enter foster care);
- Need to expand child abuse prevention services;
- Need for expanded post-adoption support services;
- Need for more child mental health services.
- Need to recruit Hispanic foster and adoptive parents.



North Carolina has 90 days to submit a plan to make improvements addressing these concerns. State and county staff, judges, advocates, attorneys general and family members will be asked to contribute. The public will have a chance to comment as well.

Child protection practices identified as particular strengths in NC include:

- Prompt and appropriate intervention on initial reports of child abuse and neglect;
- An exceptionally low rate of children entering foster care a second time;
- Half of all children entering foster care are only in care for a year or less;
- Substantial increase in adoptions, and low rate of adoption disruptions, reflects the state's commitment to permanent homes for children;
- An exceptional job in keeping foster care placements in close proximity to the families;
- A clear emphasis on keeping siblings in foster care together;
- Increased reliance on relative placement in lieu of foster care;
- A healthy cooperation among DSS, law enforcement, Tribes, courts, mental health, and other partners.
- Good job training foster parents.

"North Carolina has made significant improvements in child welfare in the last four to five years, and this report recognizes that," said Earl Merritt, director, NC Association of County Social Services Directors. "I think the praise we received is a direct result of the mandatory training that all staff undergo, and the state's review of each county every two years. But we should never be satisfied. We need to always look for more and better ways to protect children."

The report is available on the web at **www.dhhs.state.nc.us/docs/acfreview2001.htm**

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